

Title	Time and Monumentality	Author	Vladimir Safatle
Date	2016	Artist	Mauro Restiffe
Publication	SAFATLE, Vladimir. <i>Time and Monumentality</i> . São Paulo: Galeria Fortes Vilaça, 2016 (exhibition text)		

Time and Monumentality

In philosophy it is normally said that time is a subjective condition of experience. This is a more precise way of stating that time is not something that inheres in the things themselves, but rather in the subjects who observe them. Because time would be nothing else than the name we give to a way of organizing the field of experience through the principles of succession and simultaneity. As it is not be an immanent quality of things, as it is not stuck to the things in their inner breath, this sort of time would be unmoving, lacking history. That is, time would lack time; the field in the interior of those things we observe changing would never itself change. Because if things change in time, if we can observe processes in mutation, it is because the form of time is static. The form of time would need to be continuously identical in order for the changes of states, movements and velocities to be felt.

But it is true that for as long as this conception has existed there has been the aim to show its limitation. There is a certain passion rooted in the human being that consists in seeking to apprehend these moments in which the time of things seems to pulsate in front of us. This passion for the raw impact of the presence of things and for their power to break our trivial schemes of temporality – an impact that could treat the form of time as though it were a pliable material, always being remodeled – is something that is certainly not strange to the consistency of Mauro Restiffe's photographic work.

Nevertheless, it is certain that Restiffe chose the more counterintuitive path for this listening to the time of things. This path was already clearly present in works previous to this *Rússia* [Russia] now being presented. We remember, for example, his now classical series of photographs of Lula's swearing-in ceremony, in 2002. To meet the challenge of grasping the temporal dynamics of a historical event, Restiff chose monumentality. For this reason, his photographs are the expression of a disproportionality, or we could say, of an unsuitability. There is a disproportion between the human scale and the monumentality of the space, so clearly present, for example, in *Empossamento #2* [Inauguration #2]. There is something sublime in this disproportionality, in this presentation of a perspective that no perspective of those present within the space itself could apprehend. Because the happening is always the breaking of all the perspectives in light of the affirmation of something that seems to update that which is too large to enter a perspective, too large to be the mere confirmation of a subjective condition. In this sense, monumentality is the first expression of that which seems to cross our capacity for understanding.

But we note that there is something further in the monumentality of Restiffe's photos. Because they seem to point to an experience of time that breaks the dynamic of our subjective conditions, a time that is no longer organized in the successive linearity of the past, present and future. It is not by chance that these photos so effectively express something of the essential nature of Brasília. In the presence of Brasília's monumentality, with its modernism that seems to point to a future that remained outside of time, without conditions to become a reality, with its empty spaces that seem to mimic the silent happenings of the arid savannas that surround that city, the time of the subjects can no longer have a place in the world. In light of a modernity that was never in fact realized, the subjects discover latent elements of a strange past that was never present, of a time outside of time.

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In this sense, there is perhaps no more successful example than *Empossamento #8*. If there is something that accompanies Brazil and its image of itself, it is the belief that we are haunted by a defibered reality that lacks “order,” and therefore has a continuous tendency to move toward the formless, toward the deconstitution of all form. As though there were a general principle for the corruption of the forms and structures in Brazil. Perhaps this explains why the “desire for geometry” was always such a strong thrust in Brazilian contemporary art. Geometry and its shapes are something that only exist in the interior of the desire for instatement, for the reconstruction of the space based on its zero degree. This reduction of the presence of power to the affirmation of the rule of geometry, as we see in *Empossamento #8* as well as in his Ministries series in an irresistible line toward the vanishing point line, reechoes a founding desire of Brazilian modernity in its exorcism of the formless basis of Brazilian nationhood.

Nevertheless, and in an unexpected way, the work in question by Restiffe does not contain any affirmative tone. This is explained by the fact that we are not in the register of the representations of the movement of the instatement of a new spatiality, but in the register of a research concerning the plasticity of time. We will now return our focus to the series about Russia in order to better understand this problem.

There is an irony when this same structure of time in Moscow and other places of Russia is found among the capital of Brazil, with its dreams of restoration based on empty space, and in Moscow, with its mixture of continuity and discontinuity, of a desire for permanence and a desire for revolution. This is why, far from being a mere documentation of the space, this work by Restiffe involves a questioning about monumentality as a strategy for listening to time.

It is interesting to imagine what led Restiffe to Russia in the 1990s and in the first quarter of the 21st century. After all, where else in the world is this strange time of things without time so evident? Its large buildings, its residential complexes which, more than anywhere else, have the appearance of impersonal machines for people to live in, its monuments to progress and to the development that was to have ultimately taken Russia out of the static time of its agrarian past in order to open space for the “new man” promised by communism: although all of this hovers today like ghosts, like specters possessing materiality and presence. They remind us of the disproportionality opened by these times charged with the desire for rupture and reinstatement. But they also exude a singular nostalgia of something that was never actually experienced, which never in fact became real.

An emblematic work in this sense is *Monument*, which portrays the base of a well-known Soviet monument in honor of the conquest of outer space. The exaltation of the future represented by the imagery of the space race which put a man in orbit for the first time can be partly seen here. A cut monument, without its resolution. Only the raw presence of what returns to its initial condition of a geometric shape that seems to mimic a movement headed toward the sky. Here lies the greatness of the belief that at last this other “country of the future,” Russia, had arrived at an insuperable position. A belief incarnated as a monument made of fragile material, metallic plates which are now old, reminding us of something that was never actually experienced.

This time that was never in fact lived, but which was constructed based on ideal images, is nevertheless able to colonize another space that appears with less frequency in Restiffe’s photos, to wit, the space of intimacy. One can

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perceive how the experience of monumentality proper to the public space appears, in a very singular way, to provide the coordinates for the way that Restiffe enters the private space. His private spaces seem to be constructed with images of images. This does not concern unfolding these singular and fleeting gestures that we hope to find when we return our gaze to intimacy; rather, it seeks to update these ideal images that seem to indicate how we find, also here, the time of what seems to never pass because it was never completely present. A time without a definite coordinate, without succession and simultaneity.

A raw time, like the one that appears in *Russia (Mirror in Bed)* with its archetypical staging of light, shadow and reclusion in the intimacy of the bedroom, as well as in *Russia (Window)*, with its grasping based on the interior gaze of someone in his or her own home. A grasping not of the unusual or the ephemeral, but of the trivial and of the continuously repeated: people standing by a car, without any potential for happening. Here, the time is not the time of surprise that we always expect upon seeing representations of intimacy. This is a time of the interiors that are in a suspended and frozen time, an essential quality of monuments.

In this way, Restiffe justifies his choice in presenting a place that saw all the forms of acceleration, suspension, paralysis and deconstitution produced by recent history. Because there is no place better than Russia and its contradictions to disclose this uneasy pulsing of the time of things that no longer seem to know exactly their natural place, their proper circuit in the scheme of things. In this sense, Russia is perhaps the most extreme point of the multiple times of history. It was up to Restiffe to translate it in several series of images with a particular expressivity. With his photos, we are not standing before witnesses, first-person reports, or documents. We are standing before an elaborate reflection on the plasticity of time based on one of the spaces that has most undergone changes in recent history.